

Irvin in The Lion’s Den

After winning FDA approval in 1983 to medicate with cannabis — and a regular supply from the U.S. government — the author kept working to end Prohibition.

By Irvin Rosenfeld

In late March of 1997 a Florida activist named Toni Latino phoned. She had heard about a one-day conference in Orlando to train people from all over the country to oppose medical marijuana initiatives. (There were rumors that reformers were considering an initiative in Florida.)

The conference was a few weeks off. All the leading anti-drug organizations would be represented, led by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America. William Bennett, who had been Drug Czar in the 1980s, would be the main speaker. She suggested we get credentials and attend along with some fellow activists.

I told her it was a great idea, but if I went, it would be by myself. I would not acknowledge that I knew anyone else. I only wanted to be responsible for me, myself, and I.

Then it occurred to me: why not try to become one of the speakers? If they would let me speak at the conference, they would know exactly how to combat medical Cannabis.

Toni provided a phone number and I called to request credentials. I was asked why I wanted to attend. I answered, “Since I work for GKN Securities, I need to know how to go against medical marijuana.” That was satisfactory.

Then I called the organizer of the conference and asked if I could be one of the speakers. “What would you speak on?” I was asked.

“This conference is to teach people how to go against medical marijuana, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“I’m the second-longest surviving patient receiving medical marijuana from the federal government, so if you allow me to speak, you all will know how to go against us.”

He said there was no way he would allow me to speak and he wanted to know how I got credentials. I told him I worked for GKN Securities. He asked, “What type of Security Company is that?” I replied, “Stocks and bonds.”

He slammed the phone down. I proceeded to call the four major television stations and the Orlando Sentinel and told them who I was and that I had asked to speak — only to be told that I not be allowed to and that my credentials would be pulled for the conference.

I knew exactly what the reporters were going to do next: call the head of the conference and ask why he wouldn’t let me speak. That’s what happened — and he blew up, I was told. The reporters did stories exposing the bias of the conference. And because of the media attention, my credentials were not pulled.

Sometimes political work is actually fun. I decided to call my own press con-

ference at the hotel where the conference was being held. I put together a release — “They may not let me speak, but they can’t keep me from speaking!” — and faxed it to the media and to the head of the conference.

The conference was on Saturday, April 12, 1997. Intending to get there early, I hit the road at 4:30 a.m. for the two-hundred-mile drive to Orlando. The last time I made a long drive to speak on medical Cannabis had been fifteen years ago when I told my story to the FDA doctors’ panel. Now my status had changed, I was a Federal patient. The Cannabis I was carrying was legal. I was still the same person, only a lot healthier. “Too legit to quit!”

I got to the Adam’s Mark Hotel, which was part of a mall where the conference was to be held, around 8 a.m., two hours before the conference started. As I was

The chairman welcomed everyone and while looking at me, said, “Anyone getting out of line will be escorted out and risk arrest.”

pulling into the parking lot, about 20 uniformed police officers turned to look at me. The closest parking spot was a handicapped spot, which was empty. I pulled in and about eight officers started walking towards me. I got out of my Explorer, smoking my medicine, and walked to the passenger side to put on my dress shirt, tie and to grab my coat.

I greeted the officers and said, “I heard the governor’s going to be here.”

“He’s not coming,” I was told.

“It seems like a lot of police for no governor.” I continued taking my medicine and changing my shirt. I tied my tie, put my Cannabis cigarette out, put the roach in my roach bag in my shirt pocket, put my coat on and started walking to the entrance.

Two officers walked in front of me, two behind, two to my right, two to my left. I was sandwiched in. I wondered what they thought I was going to do. I walked into the hotel lobby where another 20 or so uniformed officers turned to stare at me. I asked the officer with the most stripes where the conference was. She pointed to the escalator and off I went to the second floor with my new entourage.

There were tables set up with envelopes in alphabetical order for the attendees. Sure enough, my name was on one. I picked up my package, put on my nametag, and headed into the auditorium. The room, which seated two-thousand people, was empty. There were three aisles with a microphone stand halfway down each one. I headed down the left hand aisle and I sat down right beside the microphone. My bodyguards sat all around me. I felt like a chess piece. The quiet was deafening. (Now I knew what that meant.)

Little by little, the room filled up. The chairman welcomed everyone and while looking at me said, “Anyone getting out of line will be escorted out and risk arrest.”

The first speaker was William (Bill)

Bennett, an overweight man whose gambling addiction had not yet come to public attention. Bennett’s theme was that people who didn’t “just say no” to marijuana are immoral, because its use is illegal. (As Drug Czar, Bennett had urged prosecutors to go after illicit drug users, not just dealers. He also ordered public hospitals to drug-test pregnant women, which resulted in many poor women losing custody of their kids.)

As soon as Bennett finished, I got up and stood behind the microphone. About 10 people formed a line behind me. He first called on the questioner at the right-aisle microphone. Then he called on the questioner in the middle-aisle. Then he went back to the right side, and so on. He was not going to call on me. I just stood there not making a move. The police were tensed, I could feel they were ready to pounce. Once the people behind me realized that for whatever reason Bill Bennett was ignoring our aisle, they moved to the other microphones.

One by one, people asked their questions and made their comments — everyone but me. I stood there looking directly at Bill Bennett, who would not look my way.

When everyone had asked their questions the chairman announced that Bill was going to hold a private press conference in a smaller room. I got up with my escorts in tow and tried to get into the press conference. I was denied entry. So I waited outside for the reporters to emerge.

Fifteen minutes later, out walked all the reporters and camerapersons. I raised my voice and announced that I was Irvin Rosenfeld and would be holding a press conference later. They all stopped and came over. Someone asked if I could hold my press conference then and there. I asked one of my police guards to please find the head of security for the hotel.

The head of security came over and asked what he could do. Along the hallway were 11 rooms with the lights on and nobody in any of them. I asked if I could use one of the rooms to hold my press conference. He said “No.”

I asked him why and he said, “All the rooms are being used.”

A reporter cracked, “I didn’t realize how many ghosts there were in this hotel.”

“What about 1 p.m.?”

He replied, “They’re already booked.”

Meanwhile, the heads of the conference had showed up. The head of security said I could hold a press conference at a location just beyond the mall. Through a window he pointed toward it. It was a distance of about five football fields. Not the kind of walk I would normally do.

The leaders of the conference and the police had these smug looks, as if to say, “We got you.”

I said, “Fine, that’s what we will do.” The reporters and cameramen looked at me skeptically and I said, “Let’s go.”

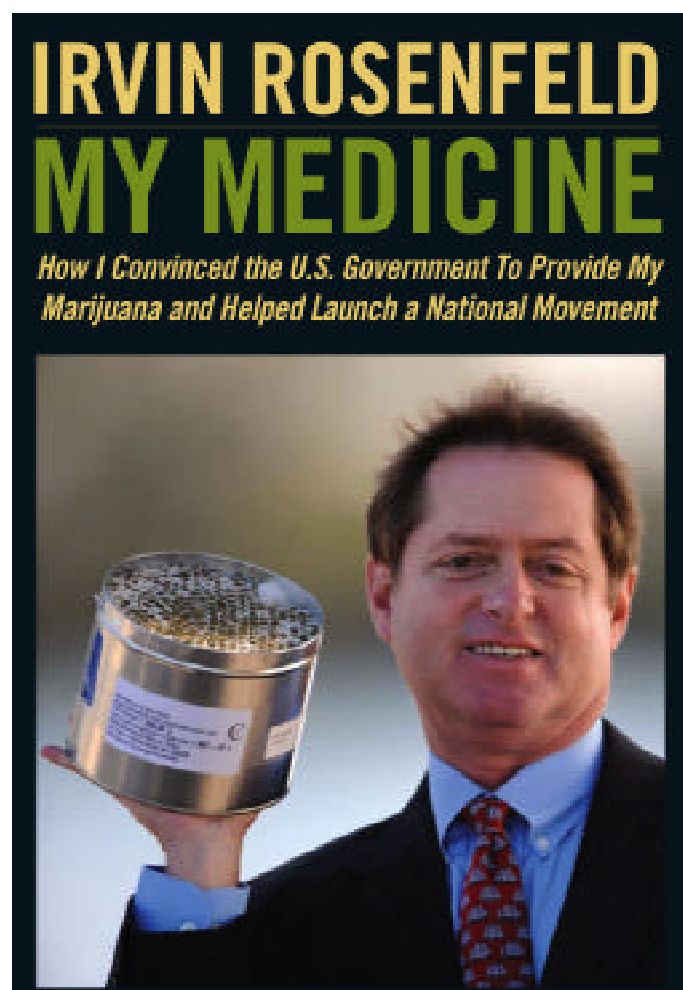
Down the escalator I went, followed by the media, the conference organizers, and the cops. I walked to my car — the car parked closest to the hotel — unlocked the door, took off my sport coat, took out my medicine and lit up. It had been almost three hours since I last medicated and I was hurting.

“I’m just talking to some people while I take my medicine. Do you have a problem with me taking my medicine, which is prescribed by the United States federal government?”

I stood there taking my medicine and just started talking to the reporters. The cameramen started filming. The heads of the conference started yelling I was not allowed to hold a press conference on the hotel grounds. I said, “I’m just talking to some people while I take my medicine. Do you have a problem with me taking my medicine, which is prescribed by the United States Federal Government?” The media loved it.

The conference people insisted the police do something. With cameras go-

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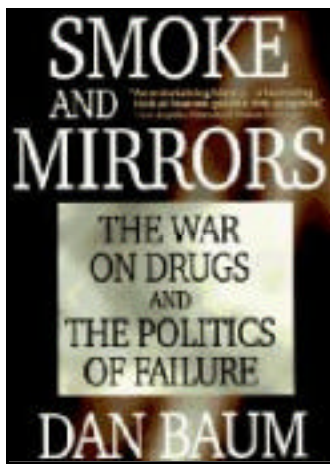


COVER OF IRV ROSENFELD’S AUTOBIOGRAPHY depicts him holding a can of cannabis grown, processed, rolled into cigarettes and shipped to his pharmacist by the U.S. government.

Irvin Rosenfeld is a stockbroker based in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. In 1983 he became the second person in the U.S. to get FDA approval to medicate with cannabis — and a regular supply from NIDA... “In the Lion’s Den” is a chapter from Rosenfeld’s just-published autobiography, “My Medicine.” To order a signed first edition, mail a check or money order for \$24.95 to My Medicine c/o Irvin Rosenfeld 4846 N. University Drive #373 Lauderhill, Fl. 33351

William Bennett, Voice of Virtue

Bill Bennett's stint as Drug Czar under George H.W. Bush is described in "Smoke & Mirrors," a superb history of the War on Drugs from the 1960s through the mid-1990s. Bennett had previously been Secretary of Education in the Reagan Administration. As Drug Czar, according to author Dan Baum, Bennett hired a crew of rightwing ideologues who had served under him at the Department of Education, including his chief of staff, John Walters (who would later become



Drug Czar under George W. Bush).

Bennett's crew, according to Baum, "achieved the most radical recasting of the country's 'drug problem' yet. Drugs would no longer be discussed as a health problem. If the drug issue was going to serve the Bennettistas' decade-long crusade to police the nation's character, drug abuse needed to be placed in the same category as offensive art, multicultural teaching, and ethical relativism: a matter of morality.

"The simple fact is that drug use is wrong," Bennett decreed. "And the moral argument, in the end, is the most compelling argument."

Bennett relied on circular reasoning: drug use is immoral because drugs are illegal, and drugs are illegal because they're immoral. He urged prosecutors to go after casual users whose lives were manageable because their example might send a confusing signal to their friends, neighbors, and children. He promoted public hospitals' drug-testing of pregnant women, which resulted in many women losing custody of their newborn babies. (Only poor women have to rely on public hospitals.)

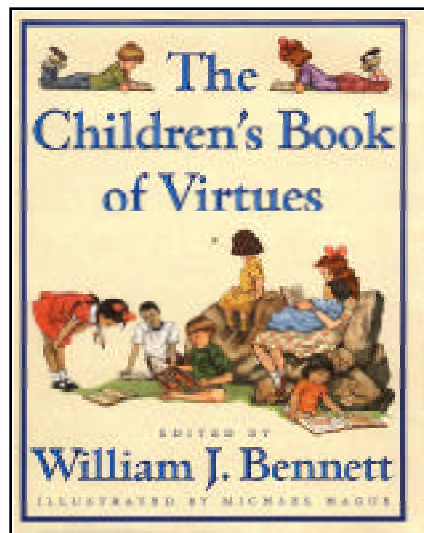
Bennett's biggest accomplishment as drug czar was to increase the budget

52%. After 18 months he declared victory and resigned unexpectedly. He then served briefly as chairman of the Republican National Committee, but quit the \$125,000/year gig when it turned out that he couldn't pocket the speaking proceeds. "I didn't take a vow of poverty," Bennett said at the time. It seemed venal and gross, but later we came to understand.

In 2003 Bennett was exposed in Newsweek and the Washington Monthly as a big-time compulsive gambler who holed up at Las Vegas casinos for three-day binges. Bennett had blown at least \$8 million at the slot machines. Only profits from "The Book of Virtues" and its many best-selling spin-offs, plus \$50,000 speaking fees, enabled him to avoid debt.

It also came out that he played in a weekly Washington poker game with Supreme Court Justice Scalia, Chief Justice Rehnquist (who took Fentanyl daily for back pain and checked into a rehab spa every summer), and the failed rightwing nominee, Robert Bork.

The Republican Damage Control Team tried to put a lid on the story of Bennett's gambling addiction, employ-



ing the same arguments that Bennett's Drug War victims had used in vain to fend off persecution. There they were on TV: "Why is it anybody's business?" asked the effete Billy Kristol. "He did no one any harm," said Tony Blakely (himself a compulsive overeater). "He has taken personal responsibility," de-

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clared Anne Coulter (brushing back a strand of hair thinned by excessive bleaching). "It's between him and his family," said another blonde who'd had some bad work done on her lips... The Damage Controllers promptly turned out poor Mrs. Bennett to announce that she would not let Bill take any more "trips."

Other arguments were splashed on the flames by these Friends of Bill: gambling isn't a sin to Catholics, gambling is legal, he didn't go into debt, and so forth. It was all a misdirection play. What's reprehensible about Bill Bennett is not his gambling but his monumental hypocrisy. When someone who really understands the force of compulsion tells the world that compulsion can easily be overcome by will, it's a conscious lie. To imprison people behind that lie is completely immoral.

Joshua Green of the Washington Monthly elicited from Bennett an evasive but revealing quote: "When reminded of studies that link heavy gambling to divorce, bankruptcy, domestic abuse, and other family problems he has widely decried, Bennett compared the situation to alcohol. 'I view it as drinking,' Bennett says. 'If you can't handle it, don't do it.'"

A source at a casino told Green that Bennett always tried to slink around unseen. "He'll usually call a host and let

us know when he's coming. We can limo him in. He prefers the high-limit room, where he's less likely to be seen and where he can play the \$500-a-pull slots. He usually plays very late at night or early in the morning—usually between midnight and 6 a.m."

Bennett's connections are so power-

ful that, after a brief absence, he resumed pontificating on the airwaves. Rosie heard him recently advising parents never to tell their kids that they once smoked marijuana and found it to be harmless. "He said that hypocrisy is better than honesty because it shows you have moral standards. I don't know about his Catholic schools, but in my Catholic schools we received a moral education, we read philosophers and discussed them, we were taught that you don't lie and that hypocrisy is completely immoral. Jesus said, 'You hypocrite, take the beam out of your own eye before you talk about the splinter in someone else's.'"



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ing, the police said I had every right to take my medicine. The power of the media can turn a lion into a lamb.

For the next 40 minutes I smoked two joints, talking the whole time. I pointed out why I should have been allowed to speak at the conference and why medical Cannabis was not a stalking horse for full legalization. It wasn't a press conference, I was just educating some new friends—including some cops and some prohibitionist bureaucrats—about medical Cannabis.

Upon finishing the second joint, I announced that I was now ready to take that long walk to hold my press conference, at which point I would be glad to answer all questions. The media had gotten all the material they needed, of course. It turned out to be one of the best press conferences I never had!

I went back into the hotel and had lunch. My police escort stayed outside the restaurant. I was actually starting to feel sorry for them. You could see a change on their faces. They had heard what I said, and they knew I was right, but right or wrong, they had a job to do.

After lunch I went back outside and took more medicine. Now the police just stayed by the front door and talked amongst themselves. After smoking two more, I went back into the conference.

I went into the room and lo and behold, the same seats were open. My escorts and I sat down, but I didn't feel as much tension.

When the panel finished, people seated in my section went to the other microphones to ask their questions. I guess they expected me to try and ask another question. I sat in my chair thinking that I had made a difference.

The last panel included an AIDS specialist who was against the medical use of marijuana because he thought it compromised the immune system. An activist in the audience, an AIDS patient named Greg Scott, credited Cannabis with saving his life by restoring his appetite. He stood up to yell at the doctor and was told to sit down. The doctor continued and Greg did it again. He was told to sit down or be escorted out and arrested. Guess what happened a few minutes later? Greg was arrested and taken to the same Orange County Jail that I had visited in 1983.

That was the reason I wanted to be on my own at the conference.

The doctor finished and it was time for questions. I stood up and was the only one in my line. They started taking questions from the right aisle, then the middle, then back to the right, then back to the middle. The woman at the mike pointed

towards me and asked, "Why won't you let him ask a question?"

God was around again.

Now the panel was stuck and the head of the conference begrudgingly said to me, "You have one minute to ask your question."

I said, "My name is Irvin Rosenfeld and I am the second longest Federal medical marijuana patient in the United States, having been supplied by Uncle Sam for 15 years and my question is this. Being one of six patients in the country using medical marijuana, I want to ask the following. As a stockbroker handling millions of dollars on a daily basis, all while using ten to twelve Cannabis cigarettes, from which I get no high, my question is this. Since all these organizations spent all this effort and expense to teach and educate people how to go against medical marijuana, I would think these organizations would want to put on as complete a conference as possible. Since I contacted the head of this conference almost a month ago telling him my credentials, my question is this: Why wouldn't you allow me to speak on the subject of medical marijuana so everyone here would know exactly how to go against us?"

The head of the conference responded, "We weren't going to let you speak and we shouldn't even have let you

in." You could see steam coming out of his ears.

As I was walking out at the end of the conference, the woman who supported my right to ask a question came over and said, "I really wish they would have let you speak. I'm president of the United States PTA and I have one question for you. What do you say to the kids?"

I thanked her and said, "Your question is easy to answer. Start telling kids from the beginning that Cannabis is a medicine and only a doctor can recommend it just like any other medicine. My nieces and nephews grew up with me and were against drugs and cigarettes, but Cannabis was their uncle's medicine and today they are all successful and not using marijuana. All the neighbor's kids were also anti-drug and anti-cigarettes, but Cannabis was Irvin's medicine. Kids are not dumb and shouldn't be treated that way." She liked my answer. I thanked her for her courage and said goodbye.

I walked out of the hotel about ten steps and realized the police were staying at the door. I yelled back to them, "Stay well" and walked to my car. I took off my tie and coat, changed to a short sleeve shirt, lit up and drove off. I had survived in the lion's den.